UNITED NATIONS

World Chronicle

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UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY
World Institute for Development Economics Research

PROFESSOR MIHALY SIMAI, Director of the United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU/WIDER), reviews the activities of the UNU. The University has no students nor faculty. It has a number of research and training centres in various countries. The University conducts research in the fields of environment, population, disarmament, unemployment, hunger and poverty, as well as in social and economic development, and it trains young scholars and academics from third world countries. WIDER deals with development issues from a global perspective.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Over the last few decades, environmental, economic and political systems of the world have witnessed rapid global transformations. Recognizing the increased need for multilateralism to deal with the various aspects of these dramatic changes, the United Nations University, or UNU, has established a number of research and training centres and has initiated several research programmes.

Our guest today is the Director of the United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research. He is Professor Mihaly Simai. Joining me to talk with Professor Simai are Bhaskar Menon of *The Times of India* and Emiko Tate of NHK, Japan Broadcasting Corporation. Professor Simai, welcome to World Chronicle.

Prof. Simai, for starters, perhaps you'd tell us a little bit about the United Nations University. I think it's probably an institution with which many in our audience are not very familiar. How did it come about? What does it do? Where is it based? Does it have a campus? Tell us a little bit about it.

SIMAI: Okay. The United Nations University is in Tokyo. It's about 20 years old. The original idea of establishing a university for the United Nations came from the late Secretary-General U Thant, but the format in which the UNU has been established is quite different. It is an international research and training centre -- research on the main global issues, and training young scholars, academics, on some very important topics. The University has its headquarters in Tokyo and also runs a major research programme in Tokyo from the Centre, and there are a number of research and training institutions, one in Macao dealing with software development, another one in Maastricht dealing with science and technology, again for developmental purposes, a third in Caracas dealing with biotechnology, and a new one in Accra, Ghana dealing with natural resource management and natural resource development from the perspectives of the African countries.

LITTLEJOHNS: How many people are employed in these projects?

SIMAI: The United Nations University is employing relatively few people, but we have a very wide network. For example, the institute of which I am the director, WIDER, is employing about 32 people in Helsinki -- it's located in Helsinki, Finland -- and we have about 160 people working for us in 36 countries in about 14 or 15 research programmes. So most of the research work is done by international networks, and the main goal of these networks is really to channel knowledge from the countries, from the

academic world in different countries, to the United Nations system, because UNU is considered the bridge between the global academic community and the United Nations system. And in a way, as the Secretary-General, Mr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, expressed, he wanted UNU to become a think tank for the United Nations, and the UNU is increasingly fulfilling that task.

LITTLEJOHNS: WIDER is a great acronym, if I may say so. Tell us a bit about WIDER. What do you do?

SIMAI: WIDER is a research institute on development economics, which means that we are dealing with the global economic system from the perspective of global development. This doesn't mean that we are dealing with developing countries only, but we are focusing to a large extent on the specific issues, constraints, possibilities of the developing countries in the present and future global economy.

MENON: From your description, it's a very amorphous entity, the UNU; it's kind of spread all over the world. How do you assess whether you've been successful or not?

SIMAI: You see, it's very difficult for any research institution to assess its success or failure. There are many ways, however: for example, are the publications of the United Nations University, or let's say of UNU/WIDER, widely read? Is there any reference? And I think one of the signs of success is the reference. And I think WIDER, for example, could be proud that we have a number of publications, and there are many references in different academic publications, United Nations publications, to the research work of WIDER. One example: We had a major research programme on hunger and poverty, and this is considered as a standard programme. The results are widely accepted as the main sources of new knowledge on the interrelations between poverty and --

MENON: What are some of the findings on hunger and poverty?

SIMAI: Some of the findings: That poverty has several faces; it would be an over-simplification to consider poverty as something which is the same in every part of the world -- it has several faces. And therefore attacking poverty requires a great variety of policies. Hunger is very closely related to poverty, much more closely than to the lack of food or lack of agricultural product. Basically, the outcome of the researchers in this project revealed that the key issue is the entitlement to income. So without entitlement, hunger cannot be eliminated; poverty is the main source of hunger, and the main source of poverty is the lack of income. And there are proofs that in countries where there was abundant food, there was still hunger because people had no access to income, had no entitlement, empowerment. So this is a key issue.

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The second issue, second main issue, is that public policies should be extremely cautious, and the key instrument of public policies should not be really the distribution of food, it should be more income generation, special programmes -- you know, employment programmes, emergency employment programmes, upgrading of people's capacities, and so on. The third lesson is related to the role of the family, and especially to the role of women, who are playing a key role in the struggle against hunger. Because even on a very low level, in that level of poverty, they could do a lot if they are properly prepared, properly trained; and therefore the education of young girls is considered especially important, I must say a vital issue in this context.

TATE: I just wanted to ask you, you said the University is located, or headquartered in Tokyo. Why was Tokyo chosen as the location?

SIMAI: It was very simple. The Japanese government was very generous, offering an endowment fund for the establishment of this university and also providing all the facilities. And about two or three years ago, a new headquarters of the United Nations University has been built, again, a generous contribution of the government of Japan and the municipality of Tokyo. That's the simple reason.

TATE: And then you have students from all over the world that come? Or who are the students and who are the faculty?

SIMAI: You see, this is a university without students and professors. We used to call it --

LITTLEJOHNS: But you're a professor.

SIMAI: I'm a professor, but I'm a professor -- my background is really a university in Hungary, not really --

LITTLEJOHNS: You're not a professor of the UN University?

SIMAI: The UN University is not providing any professorship, no title, nothing.

TATE: Are you -- do you work in Tokyo? Or are you --

SIMAI: I work in Helsinki.

TATE: But you head the university? Or you're director of the UNU/WIDER.

SIMAI: WIDER, that's located in Helsinki. The UNU Centre is located in Tokyo. And the students are really people who are trained in the framework of relatively short training programmes, let's say how to develop software, for example, for railway systems, or, in the case of UNU/WIDER, how to teach environmental economics on the level of universities. So the participants of these courses are young academics, or professors who are teaching, let's say, in a region environmental economics.

TATE: But how do you choose the students, or how --

SIMAI: Again, it's a very simple process. We announce the possibility through a local institution that, within a couple of months, we will have a training course in Jamaica for the region, for the Latin American region, on how to teach environmental economics. We ask the University of Jamaica to be the host. Through the University of Jamaica, we send announcements to all the local universities. People apply, and, on the basis of the applications, a committee selects the applicants for the course.

TATE: So how many students do you have at a given time, or does it vary?

SIMAI: In this course, we will have about 20 students. Or, I mean, they are not students, they are young academics or professors. These groups, I mean courses, are for 20, maximum 30 people. So I cannot tell you that at any given moment, because this is a network, and these training courses are going on in different parts of the world. In one case, however, we are developing a post-graduate structure, a post-graduate training course in Maastricht, Holland together with the local university and our institute INTECH, which is dealing with science and technology. They will develop a post-graduate training course on the management of scientific and technological development.

LITTLEJOHNS: Professor Simai, anyone watching this programme and being interested in taking part in some of these things you've been talking about, what should they do? Should they write to you, should they write to the UN University in Tokyo, or what?

SIMAI: They can write anytime to the United Nations University in Tokyo. That is the easiest and fastest way. Then the United Nations University is going to take care of these applications in directing them to the appropriate institution.

MENON: Coming back to your particular institute on development research, over the last two years the entire study of development economics has been revolutionized -- by the end of the cold war, the disappearance of Communism as an ideology offering an alternative to capitalism. What has this done to your work?

SIMAI: You see, it has created a lot of new tasks, and very interesting tasks. One of the issues we are looking at, for example: What is happening with the global military sector? We have a major research programme on the restructuring of the global military sector, which includes the future of the armies in the new era: What kind of weaponry are they going to use? What kind of defense industries are they going to develop? What will be the implications of this to developing countries and to other countries of the world? What will be the future of the arms trade in the global economy? And what's happening as the result of conversion? What's happening to the demobilized people in the developing countries, in the developed industrial countries?

MENON: And how far gone is this project?

SIMAI: This project started last year, and they have already a number of interesting results. They are going to publish three volumes as the result of --

MENON: Beginning when? When will the first volume appear?

SIMAI: I think the first volume will be ready -- the manuscript will be ready by the end of this year or early next year.

MENON: And do you have any preliminary prognosis? What does it look like?

SIMAI: It's a long story, and I cannot tell you. It's a very interesting thing, you see. Because first they had to look at the nature of conflicts: What kind of conflicts could be expected in the future? What will be the reaction of the main powers concerning the structure of their armies? And the results are very clear, that while we are talking a lot about conversion, about disarmament, about dividend of peace, armies will stay with the world and the dividend of peace will not be materialized as easily, and may be materialized on a longer-term basis from angles, from sides which are not expected or anticipated right now. But certainly there is a new stage, even in the development of the military. Then there is another very important and interesting project -- the future of development cooperation. And this project is looking at the problems of development cooperation in a comprehensive way. It is not just looking at the issues of development assistance or the aid to the developing countries, but looking at the implications of trade, of capital loss, capital flight, and many other issues, to how all this could be considered as a new framework for development cooperation, because it is evident that the aid fatigue of certain countries is and will be a difficult problem.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is World Chronicle. Our guest is Professor Mihaly Simai, Director of the United Nations University World Institution for Development Economics Research. Emiko?

TATE: You do this research, but what do you do with the research after you've researched a subject?

SIMAI: You see, we have a number of ways of disseminating the information, the results of the research. Because the most important goal of this research is really how it could be used by the UN system, by the governments, which are the most important so-called target groups of our research work. So we are publishing the results of this research work in different ways -- in big volumes together with important publishing houses, like Oxford University Press, or United Nations University Press. The United Nations University has large publication, publishing activities. Then we are publishing smaller things, executive summaries, which we are sending to governments -- reports on certain conferences or certain topics, what we did, for example.

TATE: Can you give an example of how some of your research has affected some of the UN policies?

SIMAI: You see, it's a very difficult question, anyway, how UN policies are affected, what kind of input beyond the political process is influencing UN policies. But, for example, I was referring to this question of poverty, hunger and poverty. And several governments understood the very complex interrelation between hunger and poverty and the fact that it is necessary to concentrate on the human capacities, so they implemented changes in their bilateral assistance programmes as a result of it. And then, in the UN, there have been a number of interesting discussions concerning the utilization of the research results in the framework of different UN humanitarian activities.

MENON: Can I ask you, along those lines, one of the things which is very often referred to in the UN is the drug trade. They refer to it always; in fact, the Human Development Report from UNDP mentioned -- said that it was larger than the oil trade, the volume of money that it transferred around the world. Does the international drug traffic, trade, have any development aspects? Do developing countries that export drugs benefit?

SIMAI: We are not dealing with this drug problem, so we are not doing research on drug issues. But we have some people working with us from Latin America, for example, who are indicating the very complex nature of this issue in Colombia. And it's a well known fact that to transform agriculture in Colombia to produce products which are not related to drugs is extremely difficult because of the very high income content of drugs. And if you look at the situation in the Far East, and in this so-called "Golden Triangle", again, it's extremely difficult to change production patterns. But we are not -- I mean WIDER is not involved in this.

MENON: Will you? Are there plans for you to get involved in some kind of research along these lines? Of course, if it's larger than the oil trade, one would imagine that it would require study.

SIMAI: I think there is a lot of research going on in the UN already on these issues, and one of our concerns is that we should not do parallel work. So we shouldn't do research on issues which are already taken care of in the framework of the United Nations.

LITTLEJOHNS: Professor Simai, as part of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations in 1995, there's going to be a Social Summit in Copenhagen. But one of the problems, one of the major problems it's going to address, I believe, is -- the conference is going to address -- is unemployment. Are you making a contribution? Is WIDER

making a contribution to this debate on unemployment and various other related matters? Population is another question. There was recently the Population Conference in Cairo, which ended rather more successfully than some people had feared. Are you involved in these things?

SIMAI: One of our main research programmes is related to the human side of global economic development. And within this --

LITTLEJOHNS: Population, for example.

SIMAI: No, no, not only population: employment, unemployment. What exactly employment-friendly or employment-oriented growth would mean in the end of the 20th century, or in the 21st, early part of the 21st century, when there are strong forces which are creating unemployment, there are strong pressures on the demographic side, you see. So, one of our major programmes has been already reported. You know, we had an important conference a couple of months ago in Helsinki on the politics and economics of global employment. And the report of this conference has been presented at the preparatory committee meeting for the global summit on social issues. And this report revealed a number of important interrelations between the present patterns of global politics and economics and employment issues. I think that the most important conclusion of this conference has been that employment should not be considered as an economic or demographic issue, it should be considered as an important political issue, and it should receive political priorities in national frameworks and in the system of international cooperation. And while it would not be possible to return to any full employment problems, it is necessary to emphasize full employment as a global goal, and I think this requires a new political commitment.

MENON: But you know, one of the concerns which western economists of a certain type have always expressed is that there are limits to growth. If everyone has full employment around the world, think what it'll do to the environment, think what it'll do to consumption, natural resources. Do you believe in the limits to growth?

SIMAI: You see, I think that everything has certain limits, because this earth is a limited framework. But as far as the limits to growth are concerned, and especially the employment implications of the limits of growth, what are the people going to do if they are not going to be employed, if they will not have gainful activities? And we are not talking necessarily of actual employment in the modern sector, but the utilization of their work force, the utilization of their energy, that they should not remain idle, that they should have some possibility of earning their living, one way or another. And I think no philosophy can disregard that notion.

TATE: Mr. Simai, the UN has often been accused of having many of their organizations overlapping their work, and there are also many academic institutions and think tanks. Why do we need a United Nations University think tank?

SIMAI: You see, I think that, especially in the future, the United Nations system requires increasing academic input. It is necessary to bring in all the knowledge which is available in the world on the main issues which are in front of the UN to the United Nations in order to improve the efficiency of international cooperation. And I think the United Nations University could play, is already playing a certain role, but could play a much more important role than that. You see, international organizations are learning. They have to learn. And one of the forms of learning, one of the forms of improving efficiency is really through institutions like the United Nations University.

LITTLEJOHNS: Professor Simai, everything in the United Nations has a political aspect. How do you guys manage to stay out of politics?

SIMAI: You see, science in general is also in a way subordinated to political decisions, because the money which is available for science is received basically through -- well, the large part of it through the political process. But we are, as a university institution, we are supposed to be objective. Objectivity doesn't mean that we are not dealing with political issues; we have a number of politically-related research programmes, like, for example, the relationship between global governance and peace. The whole issue of global governance is a key issue for the United Nations University structure, and those are highly political issues. Minority issues. This university revealed the very first time many years ago that there are five thousand minority groups which can claim statehood. And there is the question, what's going to happen if all those --

LITTLEJOHNS: Five thousand members of the United Nations?

SIMAI: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: On top of the 184 we have now?

SIMAI: That's right. What is going to happen? So these are very delicate political problems. So we are dealing with political issues, but we are, I would say, not a politically-biased institution.

TATE: Mr. Simai, who are your main contributors to your organization? The top three or four?

SIMAI: Financially?

TATE: The top financial contributors.

SIMAI: For WIDER, for the World Institute of Development Economic Research, the Finnish Government; we have a major Japanese foundation which contributes to our work; the Indian Government; and the Swedish Government.

LITTLEJOHNS: Professor Simai, the end of -- we have only a few seconds left -- the end of the cold war has made the whole activity of the UN University and WIDER easier?

SIMAI: I think in a way easier, in a way more difficult, because the topics, the number of topics with which we are supposed to deal with are much, much greater. Many more issues came into our area of interest. Many more demands are -- you know, have been created. Like, for example, the transforming economies in Central and Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, the changes in that area, where many new issues are now on the agenda. The developments in Asia, changes in China. So these are new topics for us.

LITTLEJOHNS: Professor Simai, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of World Chronicle.

Our guest has been Professor Mihaly Simai, Director of the United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research. He was interviewed by Bhaskar Menon of *The Times of India*, and Emiko Tate of NHK-Japan Broadcasting Corporation. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of World Chronicle.

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